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Elections and Social Conflict in Africa

ABSTRACT

Using the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD), CCAPS researchers examine elections in authoritarian systems versus those with additional democratic checks and balances to assess the relationship between elections and unrest. Through statistical models, the authors find that, during civil wars, elections are associated with four times more unrest than in non-election periods—a very significant increase in conflict. But there is not a statistically significant increase in the number of deaths during elections held amidst ongoing civil war. Even more surprisingly, there is not a strong association between unrest and elections held in post-conflict periods. The authors argue that, while elections are the sine qua non of democracy, they are not sufficient to address social grievances and can aggravate societal tensions in weakly institutionalized settings. The authors' new statistical analysis provides nuanced evidence of when holding flawed elections—without constitutional safeguards in place—can make problems worse.

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RESEARCH BRIEF – FEBRUARY 2013

ELECTIONS AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN AFRICA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD), CCAPS researchers examine elections in authoritarian systems versus those with additional democratic checks and balances to assess the relationship between elections and unrest. Through statistical models, the authors find that, during civil wars, elections are associated with four times more unrest than in non-election periods—a very significant increase in conflict. But there is not a statistically significant increase in the number of *deaths* during elections held amidst ongoing civil war. Even more surprisingly, there is not a strong association between unrest and elections held in *post-conflict* periods. The authors argue that, while elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy, they are not sufficient to address social grievances and can aggravate societal tensions in weakly institutionalized settings. The authors' new statistical analysis provides nuanced evidence of when holding flawed elections—without constitutional safeguards in place—can make problems worse.

AUTHORS

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Elections have frequently been associated with violence in Africa. From December 2007 to February 2008, tensions exploded across Kenya as a result of a disputed presidential election. The challenger, Raila Odinga, alleged electoral fraud by the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki. By the time the opposing parties agreed to a power-sharing deal, an estimated 1,500 people had been killed. In Nigeria in April 2011, the election of Goodluck Jonathan in Nigeria sparked ethno-sectarian riots, resulting in an estimated 500 deaths. In South Africa, between 1990 and 1994, clashes between the African National Congress and the Inkatha Freedom Party claimed over 2,000 lives. More generally, the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD), created by the Climate Change and African Political Stability (CCAPS) program, identifies 685 conflict events from 1990 to 2011 in which elections were a major source of conflict.¹

Elections are often promoted as a means to preserve stability and long-term peace within societies. The international community has often pressed for elections as a means to foster better governance and address social grievances. However, elections are by nature conflictual as rival parties compete for power. They have the potential to escalate from peaceful, even healthy, political debate to widespread violence and disorder. Given growing land and water scarcity, environmental degradation, food insecurity, and population growth across Africa, elections by themselves are not sufficient to ensure social cohesion. Indeed, holding flawed elections—without constitutional safeguards in place—can make problems worse.

This brief examines the relationship between elections and social conflict, presenting statistical findings that elections aggravate societal tensions in weakly institutionalized settings. This includes elections in fragile states experiencing or recovering from civil war and quasi-democratic elections in authoritarian regimes. These relationships are assessed through statistical techniques using the newly available SCAD, an events-based dataset

containing information on incidents of societal conflict in Africa during the period 1990-2010.

ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

National and international democracy advocates have often advanced elections as a means through which to counter violence and conflict. Rather than compete with bullets, elections allow rival political parties to compete for a share of the vote. Since the end of the Cold War, international actors have increasingly emphasized the need for regularly held elections, monitored by international observers.

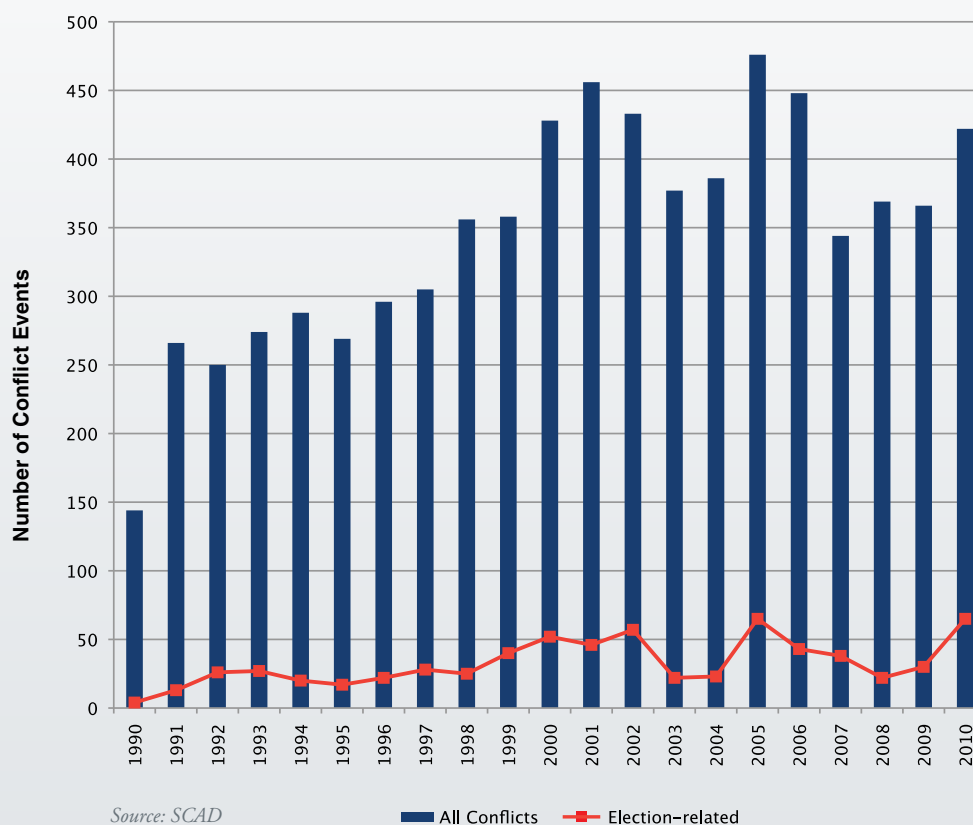
Proponents argue that elections are a means to provide ordinary citizens a voice in government and a greater stake in political outcomes. In addition, democracy promotes peace by allowing non-violent civic organizations and political parties to express themselves

through official channels. Social actors can pursue their demands and address grievances through peaceful political activism rather than turning to arms.

Empirically, numerous studies have shown that long-standing, stable democracies have many benefits associated with them. Such countries are less likely to be involved in a civil war and are more likely to respect human rights, limit corruption, protect the environment, and provide public goods such as roads, schools, and health clinics. Because of these demonstrated benefits of democracy, many international actors have pressured states to hold elections, even in difficult contexts such as the immediate aftermath of civil war.

While stable democracy is an important goal, elections can be fraught with problems, especially when held before supporting constitutional safeguards are in place. Elections encourage the airing of grievances, mobilization of social actors into rival political

Figure 1: All Conflict Events and Election-Related Conflict Events in Africa, 1990-2010



camps, and competition for power. Holding elections in illiberal states—namely those in which democracy is weakly institutionalized—can provide incentives for elites to mobilize supporters along ethnic lines or attempt to secure the election through fraud or voter intimidation. The challenge of democracy is to convince all significant actors to ‘play by the rules’ rather than cheat the system or attempt to use force. Parties must be assured that elections will not be rigged and losers must be convinced to accept defeat and wait until the next election.

Accordingly, many studies have found that democracy is more likely to survive when there is a well-developed economy, a robust civic culture, and strong institutions such as an apt judiciary and limits on executive power that are able to channel social conflict by ensuring that political decision makers are held accountable. These additional elements help preserve the integrity of elections and provide assurances to the public that the democratic process will be allowed to take its course.

In countries that lack these traits, elections have often led to violence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, hundreds died in the months surrounding the first post-conflict election in 2006. With continued violence in the east of the country and limited administrative capacity, the DRC faced a difficult context in which to hold an election. Ultimately, the incumbent Joseph Kabila won, although the election was marred by irregularities. Even in states that have not experienced a recent civil war, elections can foster electoral manipulation and attempts to alter the results through force, as seen in the 2007 election in Kenya and 2011 election in Nigeria.

WHEN DO ELECTIONS LEAD TO UNREST?

Using SCAD, this study explores two related questions. First, is there a general association between elections and unrest? Second, and

more importantly, are there factors that mediate or exacerbate the effect of elections on conflict?

This study does not argue that elections are bad per se, but that they are more likely to lead to stable outcomes when other preconditions are met.

Is there a general association between elections and unrest? Are there factors that mediate or exacerbate the effect of elections on conflict?

Namely, this analysis examines elections in authoritarian systems (e.g. Zimbabwe and Ethiopia) versus systems with additional democratic checks and balances; it also examines elections held both during and after civil war.

Elections that determine control of the executive—presidential elections in presidential systems and parliamentary elections in which the dominant party chooses the prime minister—are the focus of this study because such elections are often of higher profile and mobilize a larger share of the population than local or legislative elections.

This study uses SCAD data to focus on three separate outcomes. First, the study examines the total number of social conflict events related to elections. This includes peaceful protests, violent riots, labor strikes, and armed attacks. Second, the study separately examines only those events related to elections that were violent in nature, such as riots and armed attacks. Third, the study examines the number of deaths caused by these conflicts. For each of these three outcomes, the study considers the number of events and deaths occurring before, during, and after election months, compared with non-election periods.

This study also examines elections in various contexts to ascertain the conditions under which polls are most likely to lead to violence.

Table 1: Top 10 Most Violent Elections, 1990-2010²

COUNTRY	ELECTION DATE	DEATHS
Kenya	December, 2007	1502
South Africa	April, 1994	239
Nigeria	April, 2007	226
Cote d'Ivoire	October, 2000	178
Kenya	December, 1992	156
Zimbabwe	March, 2008	114
Togo	April, 2005	110
Nigeria	April, 2003	57
DRC	October, 2006	42
Sierra Leone	February, 1996	28

Source: SCAD

TRENDS IN ELECTION VIOLENCE

Figure 1 conveys the frequency of all forms of conflict, as well as those specifically about elections, in Africa from 1990 to 2010 according to the SCAD data. SCAD defines the issue related to each conflict event, making it feasible to distinguish between conflicts over economic resources, ethnic or religious issues, and those directly related to elections, among other issues.

During the 1990s, electoral conflicts represented an average of 7.6% of all conflicts, while in the 2000s that number increased to 10.1%. This increase could be tied to the growing frequency of elections in Africa, as democratic and non-democratic regimes alike held more elections in the 2000s.

Table 1 reports the top-ten most violent elections in Africa, as measured by the number of deaths during election periods. These figures report election-related conflict events that occur during the election month itself as well as the following month and therefore do not account for violence leading up to the election. Thus, these are conservative estimates of the extent of violence and largely capture violent deaths in post-electoral conflicts.

However, it would be inappropriate to conclude that elections are always associated with violence. Rather, in considering all countries in Africa from 1990-2010, one-third of all election months witnessed some deaths, and the remaining two-thirds remained peaceful.³ Thus, although the frequency of political violence may be higher during election periods, the vast majority of elections in Africa are relatively peaceful. This underscores the question of when and why do some elections lead to violence, while others do not.

One of the major claims of this study is that elections are likely to be fraught with conflict and violence if there are not other institutional safeguards in place. One striking feature of elections in Africa is that they often occur in undemocratic settings.

Table 2 displays the number of months with and without executive elections in countries that are ranked as democratic and non-democratic, according to the Polity IV project.⁴ Polity IV scores countries on several institutional features of democracy, including the openness and competitiveness of recruitment for the executive, constraints on executive authority, and the extent of political participation. While elections are

Table 2: Executive Elections in Democracies and Autocracies, 1990-2010

	AUTOCRACY	DEMOCRACY	TOTAL
Month with no election underway	7,276	2,384	9,660
Month with election underway	92	52	144
% of months with an election	1.25%	2.13%	1.47%

Sources: Polity IV; African Elections Database

more common in democracies—as one would expect—a significant share of elections occur in authoritarian settings, which thus lack the institutional safeguards that may be critical to preventing social grievances from erupting in violence around elections.

Finally, Table 3 lists countries in Africa that have held executive elections during or immediately after a civil war or armed insurgency.⁵ In such contexts, institutions are weak and social trust lacking, and armed actors can attempt to influence results. Therefore, such contexts are likely to be particularly difficult environments in which to hold elections.

The following section presents results of statistical models, which take into account the effect of elections on conflict and how both armed conflict and authoritarian institutions interact with election periods.

FINDINGS ON ELECTION UNREST

This study analyzed the effect of elections on total conflict, violent conflict, and the number of deaths. This analysis also assessed the relationship between elections and other features of interest, such as elections during and after civil war as well as elections in authoritarian contexts.⁶

Figure 2 graphically displays the increase in frequency of conflict events during election months, without considering additional contextual factors. Considering all African countries from 1990 to 2010, the total number of conflict events roughly doubles during election months, while the number of deaths triples during such periods.

Clearly, then, elections are generally associated with greater conflict. However, this by itself does not imply that elections are a problem in Africa. Rather, it is more important to focus on the contexts within which elections lead to unrest and the mechanisms through which stability can be preserved during elections.

Table 3: Executive Elections Held with Civil War Ongoing and within 24 Months of War Termination

ELECTIONS WITH ONGOING CIVIL WAR	ELECTIONS WITHIN 24 MONTHS OF WAR END
Angola, 1992	Chad, 1996
Chad, 2001	Guinea Bissau, 1999
Chad, 2006	Guinea Bissau, 2000
Ethiopia, 1995	Guinea, 2003
Ethiopia, 2000	Liberia, 1997
Ethiopia, 2005	Mozambique, 1994
Niger, 1996	Niger, 1993
Senegal, 1993	Niger, 1996
Sierra Leone, 1996	Niger, 1999
Sudan, 1996	Rwanda, 2003
Sudan, 2000	Sierra Leone, 2002
Uganda, 2001	
Uganda, 2006	

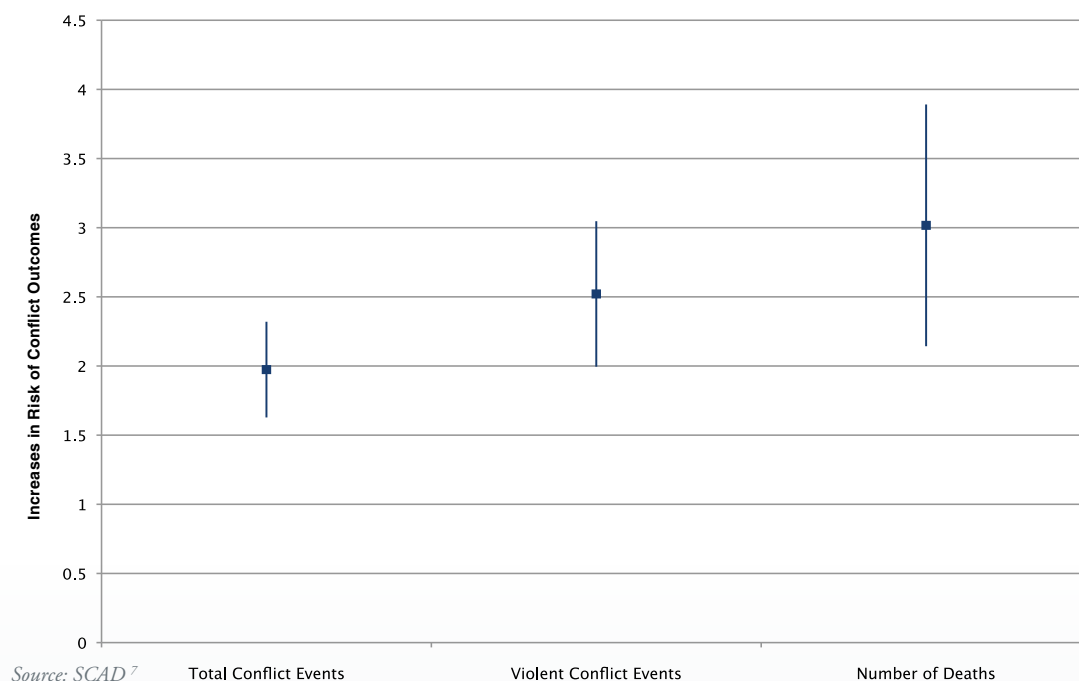
Sources: Uppsala University Armed Conflict Database; African Elections Database

This study considered several contextual factors that may make elections more or less violent. The study found that, during civil wars, elections are associated with four times more unrest than in non-election periods—a very significant increase in conflict.

But there is not a statistically significant increase in the number of *deaths* during elections held during ongoing civil war. Indeed, some of the most violent elections—Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria—occurred in the absence of armed conflict.

Even more surprisingly, there is not a strong association between unrest and elections held in *post-conflict* periods. This is perhaps due to the presence of international peacekeepers and election monitors, who may serve to deter election-related violence, although it is not possible to test this conjecture at this time given the availability of data.

*Figure 2: Estimated Effect of Elections on Conflict Outcomes, 1990-2010
(with confidence intervals)*



The study found that elections have a very strong effect on conflict in authoritarian systems. When elections are held in genuine democracies—namely those countries with checks on executive power, free political participation, and meaningful competition—the frequency of election-related conflict and violence is cut in half relative to elections in autocracies.

The study found that elections increase conflict in two distinct contexts: during times of civil war, and in authoritarian systems.

This finding would indicate that elections must be held in contexts where other institutional features of democracy and constitutional safeguards are present to inoculate societies against widespread unrest during electoral periods. This is encouraging news, but also implies that international actors should not push for a ‘rush to the polls’ unless strong institutions are in place to mitigate potential conflict.

While elections are the *sine qua non* of democracy, they are not sufficient to address

social grievances and can aggravate social tensions in weakly institutionalized settings. In many African countries, ethnic conflict, competition for resources, corruption, and unchecked executive authority provide poor contexts for voting. This, of course, is not unique to Africa but plagues many developing democracies around the world.

Nonetheless, the international community has often placed strong emphasis on holding elections and many organizations engage in election monitoring in order to deter fraud and abuse. While it is important to keep the spotlight on the electoral process itself, to prevent election-related unrest it is equally important to ensure that political parties are free to participate in a meaningful way, that judiciaries serve as a check on executive power, that the media is free and independent, and that human rights are protected. In the absence of these additional guarantees, elections are likely to fuel additional violence, ultimately making it more difficult to achieve democratic consolidation. 🌍

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD) is co-directed by CCAPS researchers Idean Salehyan of the University of North Texas and Cullen Hendrix of the College of William and Mary. It is available as a searchable online database and map, or for download, at www.scaddata.org.
- 2 The number of deaths listed captures deaths that occurred during the election month itself, as well as violence that may spill over into the following months. For example riots in Kenya following the 2007 election begin in December, but the riots last for several weeks. Therefore, many of the deaths listed here occur in subsequent months and the listed deaths refer to events that *begin* in that election month.
- 3 Out of the 9,884 country-months in the SCAD dataset, 144 were election months. Of the non-election months, 14% experienced violence while of the election months, 33% experienced violence.
- 4 Polity IV scores countries from least democratic (-10) to most democratic (+10) on different institutional dimensions. Countries at six or above are generally considered to be “democracies.” See: www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm.
- 5 The presence of civil war or armed insurgency is determined by data from the Uppsala University Armed Conflict Database, www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP.
- 6 This study employed negative binomial regression to estimate changes in total conflict, violent conflict, and the number of deaths around elections. The full details of the models, including the controls used, are available in Linebarger, Chris, and Idean Salehyan, “Elections and Social Conflict in Africa, 1990-2009,” *International Studies Association Annual Conference*, San Diego, CA, April 1-4, 2012. This paper is available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2182694.
- 7 See the full paper for a discussion of the sources of the election months used in this regression analysis, available at http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2182694.

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